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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEGUCIGALPA 000179

SIPDIS

STATE FOR P, INL, I, WHA, WHACEN AND WHA/PPC  
SOUTHCOM FOR GENERAL HILL  
JIATF-S FOR RADM SIROIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/22/2014

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SUBJECT: DRUG PLANE CRASHES AFTER INTERCEPT BY HONDURAN AIR  
FORCE; GOH INSISTS PLANE WAS NOT SHOT DOWN

Classified By: Political Counselor Francisco L. Palmieri  
for reason 1.5 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Honduran Air Force Commander insists 1/20/04 crash of a drug-trafficking civilian aircraft was not a shoot-down. According to published statements and conversations with U.S. mission military members, Colonel Caceres stated that Honduran Air Force (HAF) interceptors twice contacted the aircraft and ordered it to land. Finally, following established HAF procedures, Caceres explained that the HAF pilots, flying at the side of the aircraft in question, fired warning shots on a parallel track to the flight path. He maintains that the plane was not shot down. Post has sought, but been unable to confirm, any other information which contradicts Col. Caceres' account. Post continues to press Government of Honduras (GOH) and Honduran Armed Forces (HOAF) sources for additional details of the circumstances of the crash of this aircraft, including authorization to visit the crash site. Post will obtain a copy of the incident report as soon as one is prepared. Post recommends that the U.S. continue to share intelligence with the GOH until or unless information is received that indicates that the Hondurans actually shot down the aircraft. Halting intelligence sharing could be counterproductive to U.S. national interests and counternarcotics efforts in Honduras. END SUMMARY

12. (C) On 1/20/04, Honduran authorities were alerted by U.S. sources of the intrusion of its airspace over the Gulf of Fonseca by an unidentified, suspicious aircraft. According to HAF sources, the aircraft entered Honduran airspace around 1430 hours. In response to this information, the HAF scrambled two planes to intercept the intruding airplane, which had not filed a flight plan for Honduras. The HAF planes (Tucanos) signaled for the white, twin-engine plane to land at Toncontin International Airport. The pilot ignored this request and evaded the HAF aircraft. Sometime later, the same plane was relocated and was again approached near Comayagua in central Honduras. The HAF pilots then directed the plane to land at Soto Cano Air Base. Their instructions were ignored. Finally, after the plane changed course and began heading toward the El Salvador-Honduras border, the HAF pilots, flying at the side of the aircraft in question, fired warning shots on a parallel track to the flight path.

13. (C) HAF sources reported that shortly after those shots were fired packages of presumably drugs or fuel were tossed from the suspicious plane prior to the crash. HOAF sources said that the plane then took a series of aggressive, evasive measures, descending rapidly, before finally stalling, crashing and burning. The weather was bad at the time, and the crash took place in mountainous and forested terrain in isolated Lempira Department. Honduran Air Force Chief Caceres openly admitted that warning shots were fired; however, he insists that the HAF pilot did not shoot the plane down. Caceres reiterated that the HAF pilots followed established HAF procedures in this incident. Embassy will request that the HAF provide copies of its intercept and live ammunition policies.

14. (C) Post continues to press GOH and HOAF sources for additional details of the circumstances of the crash of this aircraft. Mission requested and received authorization to visit the crash site. It will be visited on 1/23/04 and we will report results septel. Post has sought, but been unable to confirm, any other information, which contradicts Col. Caceres' account. MILGP and DAO expect that a report of the incident will be prepared, noting a report was prepared within days of the April 2003 shoot down incident. Mission will obtain a copy of it as soon as received.

15. (C) Police sources informed post that on the morning of 1/21 police reached the site of the plane wreckage. The plane had tail number N95L (fictitious), which belongs to a Cessna 142, a different kind of aircraft. More than 19 kilos of presumed cocaine were reportedly found at the crash site, as well as the charred bodies of the pilot and one crew member.

16. (U) Separately, the media reported today that the motor

and serial number of the plane were: 642080, Model Fiuring, order 145236. The other motor number was 642081, series TMD516TT, Continental. The tail had an American flag on it. The two bodies have been moved to the morgue in San Pedro Sula. We understand that both bodies were completely charred. Identification of the remains is impossible.

17. (C) In another development, on afternoon of 1/21/04 around 1500 hours, Honduran sources reported that another suspected drug plane entered Honduran airspace. The HAF scrambled aircraft to intercept it. They were able to spot the plane over Olancho traveling in the direction of San Pedro Sula. When the drug plane saw the Hondurans it was able, due to superior instrumentation, to fly into heavy clouds and evade the HAF interceptors. Apparently the HAF aircraft do not have radar that allows them to "see" in cloud cover. The Hondurans radioed info about the plane to Guatemalan authorities. The plane was a twin engine King Air with tail number N89K (probably false). When relaying this information, HAF sources shared their concerns that, when HAF aircraft have approached these drug airplanes in the past, the suspect airplane's crews have aimed AK 47s at the HAF pilots. The HAF also reported that, on previous occasions, pilots of drug planes execute aggressive, evasive measures, including attempts to collide in mid-air, endangering HAF planes and crews.

18. (C) COMMENT: We do not believe, based on the current available information, that a cut-off of intelligence sharing appears to be warranted. Post recommends that the U.S. continue to share intelligence with the GOH until information is received that indicates that the Hondurans actually shot down the aircraft on January 20. Post notes the GOH made enormous strides in its interdiction efforts during 2003, interdicting almost 6,000 kilos of cocaine, which was more than in the previous five years combined. The GOH is going to considerable lengths and expense to assist the U.S. in our joint fight against narcotics trafficking. U.S. has to date provided token financial support for HOAF military operations. The HOAF is doing most of this work at its own initiative and cost. Halting intelligence sharing could be counterproductive to U.S. national interests and counternarcotics efforts in Honduras. Significant quantities of drugs are passing through Honduras. If the U.S. cuts off intelligence sharing based on the current information, the GOH and HOAF will feel they are being unfairly punished. Future counternarcotics cooperation could be jeopardized.  
END COMMENT.  
PALMER